

HOW TO
STOP FLOGGING
A DEAD HORSE

*The Business Owner's Guide
To Creating Happy Endings*

ALISON CLARK

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*To Lorna Ramsay who first
encouraged me to write this book*

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FOREWORD

The relevance and timeliness of this book are evident in the increasing number of choices we face whether in business or in our personal lives. When selecting a toothbrush or a brand of washing powder from a supermarket shelf becomes a ten minute crisis of indecision, how much more difficult is it for us to make important moves which will shape our futures in a complex and perplexing world?

Alison Clark has written a very readable and instructive short book on the art of ending things gracefully and tackling the process of change. She knows the value of being succinct, an important skill when the name of your business is Words in Action, and has written a book which can be read quickly and kept handy for an instant refresher. There are plenty of real-life stories to maintain interest and practical exercises help the reader progress. There is a really useful chapter on techniques for ending conversations, closing sales, finishing business relationships and even sacking clients.

Alison has written this book primarily for small business owners and people contemplating self-employment. Increasing the number of successful start-ups and growing businesses is a vital part of Scotland's economic future. But we must be careful not to let the theory and statistics of policy-making obscure the quiet courage and terrible optimism of the

people who dare to make their dreams reality. A publication like this that can help them to understand and deal with their challenges, show them that they are not alone and help them to be successful is to be welcomed with open arms.

Alison works with words to make her living, helping people to understand and express their thoughts and feelings. The proper and sympathetic use of language improves our relationships, how we live and how we do business. Every day we are faced with the manipulation of language to conceal, to control or to mislead. Straight talking and clear thinking are to be valued and fought for in business and in private and public life. I commend both Alison Clark and her book, and hope it is the first of many.

Agnes Samuel

Chief Executive, The GO Group, www.go.uk.com

INTRODUCTION

When we have invested time and energy in an enterprise, it's a big challenge to let it go and move on. How can we abandon a project in which we've invested so much? It can be even harder if family and friends encourage us to hang in:

"Don't throw in the towel. Give it one more shot."

I'm not knocking perseverance. Sir Francis Drake said that it was not the beginning of a project that counted but seeing it through to the end. There are however, times when we need to know when to let go.

"We teach best what we most need to learn."

I don't know who first said it but I've certainly found it to be true. When I'm seeking to support or advise someone else, I often find that what I'm telling them is exactly the advice or the action I most need to take myself. And it can involve an extra 'stretch' of honesty to admit it!

The idea for this book arose at a gathering of personal and business coaches. As part of our mutual introductions, we were asked to say what our particular area of expertise was. To my surprise, I heard myself saying "I'm an expert in endings." I had not planned to say this nor had I ever previously described myself in such a way. I went on to explain somewhat ruefully that life seemed to have presented me with a number of situations which involved winding

up, taking leave, or rounding off. No sooner had I joined a group than it turned out to be on the brink of folding. I would publish a piece only to find that it appeared in a magazine's final issue. My personal life has featured its share of partings.

These experiences have no doubt been the result of choices I have made. I could be described as a serial re-inventor of myself. I have had several careers and moved house many times. So I have learned a lot of lessons as you can imagine.

Eight years ago I gave up teaching to start my own business. Over twenty years ago, I co-founded and helped run a small retreat house and wound that up five years later. I have chaired meetings of organisations working their way through the process of ending. I have coached people who started new businesses and people who wanted to make major career changes.

On the personal side, my own experiences have enabled me to support friends and family when they have needed to move on. But that's for another book! This one focuses on the challenges that face the owners of small businesses and those of you who are keen to strike out on your own as self-employed.

There's plenty of advice around on starting up and running a business. What I'm exploring here is how we can move on when we feel stuck. As we know, a new beginning entails an ending and a happy ending is a much better basis for moving on than an ending that's

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messy and miserable. But if you find it hard to let go of an existing commitment or relinquish a cherished project, even when you know in your heart that the life has gone out of it, then this book will help. It will stop you from flogging that dead horse and help you find a new one.

CHAPTER 1

HOW TO STOP FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

WHAT DOES 'ENDING' MEAN TO YOU?

I'll begin by inviting you to consider what the word 'ending' means to you. I focus on this because your business is an extension of yourself. However much we separate the business from our personal life - and it's important for our health to do that - the business expresses aspects of our own personality. It cannot be otherwise. It also reflects aspects of the business culture we are part of.

In America today, many people look positively on situations which in the UK would be regarded as business failure. If something hasn't worked, the attitude goes, let's find out why and try again. Thomas Edison is quoted as saying:

"If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is often a step forward.."

This side of the pond, we still struggle with the stigma of 'getting it wrong'. So when we think of a word like 'ending', the thoughts associated may run something like this:

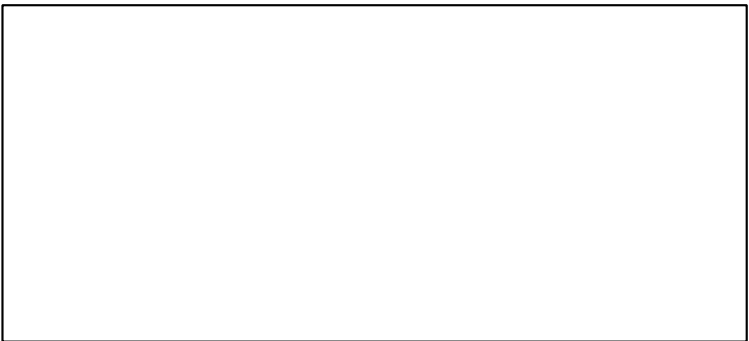
HOW TO STOP FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

"I made the wrong choice", "I messed up", "I shouldn't have taken that tack", "I should have known".

On the other hand, there are those who blame circumstances - the tax system, red tape - or they blame other people - "*you can't get the staff!*"

Neither attitude is helpful. It is not productive to feel either a failure or a victim. It is much more energising to take responsibility for our own destiny. What does it mean to take responsibility? It means that we view our situation as objectively as we can, weigh up what elements we can change and act on these by reviewing the options and making a choice. What we're talking about here are habits of thinking, the grooves along which our minds regularly run. In order to change these habits, we need first to be aware of them.

So what do you immediately think of when you read the word 'ending'? Write down as many thoughts as you can in 15 seconds.



If your list includes negatives - *dead end, road block, loss*, or even *death* I invite you to rethink the meaning of 'endings'.

Consider the classic ending of the fairy story: ...*and they all lived happily ever after*.

Or the famous concluding words of 'Gone with the Wind'...*tomorrow is another day*. Both of these are future-focussed; the endings are new beginnings.

If you associate an ending with change and opportunity, then you will respond with ease when a new start beckons. But if the words you wrote in the box include some negatives then try the following exercise.

THE OPEN ROAD

Have you ever been travelling along a road or path and found it blocked by a fallen tree or a landslide? If you have, you must have found a way out or been rescued or you'd still be sitting there instead of reading this.

So how did you cope? Did you climb around it, clear it away, go back the way you came? Did you make camp until the lifting gear arrived to move the obstacle? Were you helicoptered out?

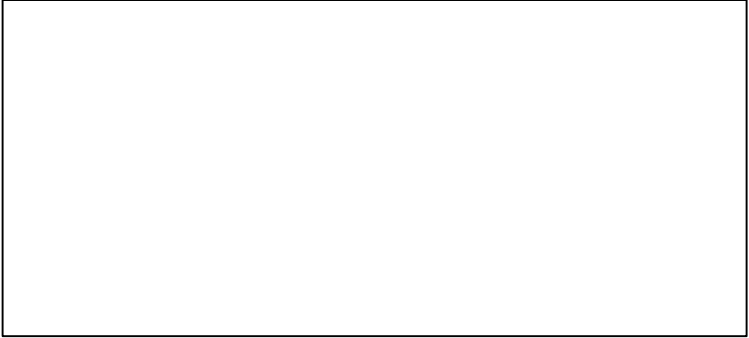
Whatever action you took, it was not The End. It may have changed the course of the day or the course of the journey but you have survived to tell the tale.

HOW TO STOP FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

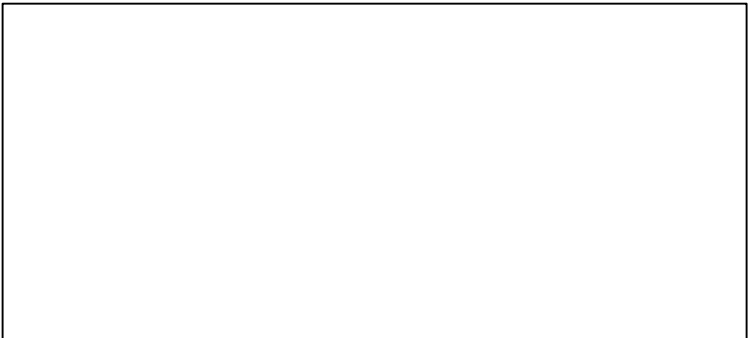
A few years ago, dramatic storms caused such sudden and severe flooding in Edinburgh that trains were suspended and what few buses could get through were packed. I was stranded in the city only 40 miles from Glasgow where I was booked to deliver a day's training the following morning. I managed to secure for the night one of the last affordable beds in the city and made my way there through the rain.

Even if the trains should be running in the morning, I would have no time to get to the office to pick up course material and equipment so I would have to turn up in the clothes I was wearing and with only a lipstick as a gesture towards makeup. I think I succeeded in buying a toothbrush and as my accommodation was in a university hall of residence, I reckoned there must be laundry facilities. So I washed my underwear and ironed it dry and collapsed into bed. I did succeed in catching a morning train, and arrived in Glasgow in time to deliver the course without benefit of visual aids or attempt at glamour. At least I knew I was wearing clean knickers!

Take a moment to think of an obstacle in your life which seemed to bring you to a complete halt. It can be personal or work-related but choose something specific rather than a general difficulty. In the box below, note down what it was and what you did about it.



To what extent were you responsible for redirecting events? List the things you thought and did and the decisions you took.



HOW TO STOP FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

These are resources that you possess and that you have brought to bear on previous challenges. Bringing them into your present awareness will give you confidence about coping with apparent dead ends. Ask yourself how you can use these to open up the road ahead.

CHAPTER 2

OVERCOMING DEAD HORSE PHOBIA

FACING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Perhaps you are afraid to look closely in case you discover that your horse is dead. Our ability to avoid or deny unwelcome information is astonishing. I know people who throw unopened bills in the bin. They're not stupid; at some level they know that this road leads to disaster but the challenge of facing the bad news and the bank manager is too much for them. If you are verging on the 'money phobic', there are some useful contacts in the resources section.

In the same way, we can know that a project or a way of doing things has come to the end of its shelf life but we muddle along rather than face the upheaval that change brings.

Human beings are innately conservative. This ensures a certain degree of stability in society. But stability can become stagnation unless some of us embrace, and even agitate for, new ways of doing things. You might expect entrepreneurs to like change but that doesn't mean that it's easy. Even the most adventurous can get stuck sometimes.

HOW TO STOP FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

Kate worked in marketing and project management and retrained as a coach when she finally decided to make the big change: *“it took a passing comment from my partner about this ‘being the fifth time that I was going to do something different’ to spur me into action.”*

Do you know what you want to do and can't seem to get in gear? The natural resistance that comes before a big change has been called 'inertia mode'. If a physical body has established a momentum, we need to act on it doubly hard to move it in a different direction. So when we want to make a big change, we need to make an extra effort.

When that effort includes ending a project or winding up a business, it is easy to find reasons for continuing. That's why we need to overcome our 'dead horse phobia' and take a good look at the excuses we give for avoiding the issue.

CHALLENGING THOSE EXCUSES

Do you recognise any of these?

We're nearly there - it would be a shame to give up now!	
I'm sure we could be up and running in a month if we just put in another 10 grand	

How will I face all these people who've supported me; they'll be so disappointed.	
It's a waste of all the resources that have been put into it.	
It was <i>such</i> a good idea!	
Who'll do it if we don't?	
It's an admission of failure...	
I can't give up the day job -it's my safety net.	

If you were advising someone else, you would be able to provide a counter argument to these. Complete the boxes now before turning the page to read my suggestions.

HOW TO STOP FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

The numbers below refer you to the relevant sections of this book.

We're nearly there - it would be a shame to give up now!	<i>How many times have you said this?</i> 2 & 3
I'm sure we could be up and running in a month if we just put in another 10 grand	<i>Know when to cut your losses in time and money</i> 2 & 3
How will I face all these people who've supported me; they'll be so disappointed.	<i>Tough</i> <i>First aid kit</i>
It's a waste of all the resources that have been put into it.	<i>Recycle them</i> 6
It was <i>such</i> a good idea!	<i>Give it away</i> <i>Implement it another way, another time</i> 6

Who'll do it if we don't?	<i>You're not indispensable 2, 4 & 5</i>
It's an admission of failure...	<i>Not necessarily 2 & First Aid Kit</i>
I can't give up the day job -it's my safety net.	<i>But it's tying you up 4 & 5</i>

Easy to say? Let's look at these in more detail.

It's an admission of failure

If I give up it will mean admitting I made the wrong choice, that I couldn't cope, or that I should never have embarked on the project in the first place. I dread the voices that will say, "*I told you so.*"

It's especially hard to let go of a project that you've undertaken in the face of opposition. Family and friends warned you that it would all end in tears. To admit that the game's over, feels like agreeing that they were right. And we all have our pride.

But let's suppose that they were 'right' in the sense that they foresaw challenges that you were not

equipped to deal with at the time. You *did* bite off more than you could chew, you *were* undercapitalised. But now you possess that knowledge for yourself because you have experienced it. You have tested the reality of your choices, and so you are better informed for making future decisions. Your nearest and dearest will probably be more understanding than you fear but even if they should go in for, "you can't say we didn't warn you", you don't have to buy it. You've learned how to do things differently next time! Apply the First Aid Kit (later in this chapter) if the process is painful.

The alternative scenario is that others may be wrong. You pulled it off or you solved the financial conundrum facing your business. It would be an understandable pleasure to prove the headshakers wrong by sticking with the successful project even when it's time to move on to a new challenge. But even success can be a trap so remember that nothing stays the same. Unless we take positive steps for continuous improvement, entropy will set in and you will lose ground.

Moving back to the top of the list, let's look at the first two...

'We're nearly there' and 'If we just put in...

These are very seductive because underlying them is the thought of time and money already spent. Many a project goes ahead when it shouldn't because no one dares cancel it. But better to cut our losses than plough on doing the wrong thing.

ALISON CLARK



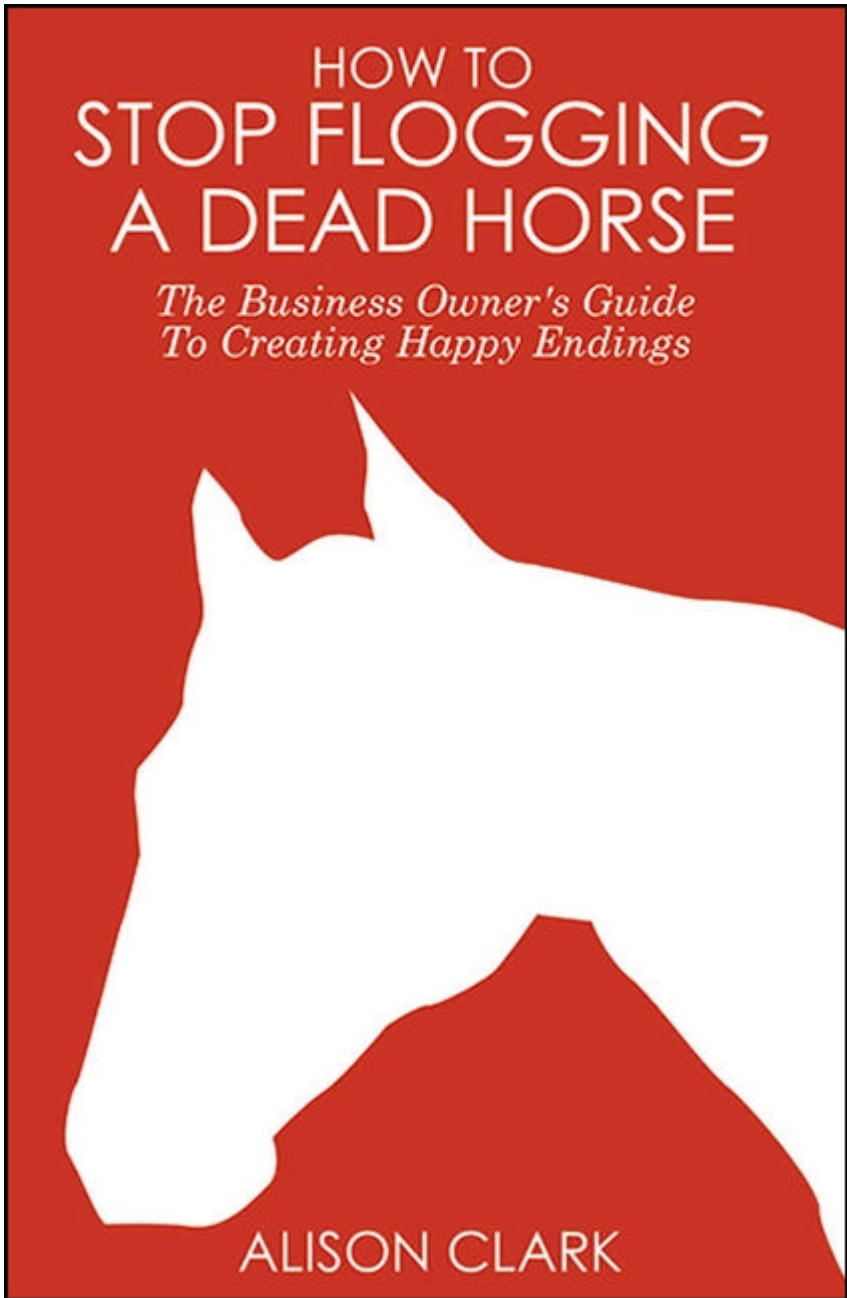
Photo - www.AndyWalters.co.uk

I am the classic serial self reinventor: secondary school teacher of English, playwright, retreat house leader, mother and owner of my consultancy, WORDS in ACTION. I have lived and worked all round Scotland.

My most recent change is to move from the city of Glasgow, my home town, to the island of Bute in the Clyde estuary from where I work as writer, presenter and coach.

I have written for theatre, cabaret and stand-up comedy; for poetry magazines and newspapers. *How to Stop Flogging a Dead Horse* is my first published non-fiction book, the first of a series designed to ease readers through the whole gamut of transitions we face in our working and personal lives.

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